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Little Candles

It's simple. It's selfish. You help others and it makes you feel good. You do it for yourself really," shrugged Rebecca, a diminutive redhead pouring coffee into a mug. "I don't catapult out of here to a bar every Friday now."

The lanky Gerry bit her lip. "Well I'm afraid to miss my Aerobics. It's Jeannette the instructor. She whines if somebody doesn't show. Holy God when I think of it, everybody's a terrorist in my life!" She twisted the string around her tea bag to coax a few more drops into the styrofoam cup. They dented her reflected face in the middle of luxuriant chestnut hair. "I do their will!"--she looked up from the tea at Rebecca--"to prevent emotional catastrophe! My...mother comes to mind. Her will be done or watch out!

So, anyway, at any rate, after Aerobics and before Trevor I can give up an hour or two. I will come--but I won't like it. My life is busy enough, cowardly though it be." They sat side by side now, atop a cluttered desk.

"What's Trevor like?" asked Rebecca. "You have thirty seconds before my boss arrives. He's young and tries to make sure breaks are precisely timed."

Gerry couldn't reply at first, but then she sputtered "He... owns things. Every time I see him he owns some more. Always the best
quality and something that does...more somehow. I have a little CD player but he has one where five or so discs sit on a sort of round thing, turntable"--Gerry put down her tea and stirred a hand in the overheated air as copy machines shuffle-thumped in the room behind them--"and ...this turntable clicks around or something, depending on how you clap your hands." She clapped her long hands in wonderment. "Does that sound right?"

"Yeah, but he can't be that much of an asshole," answered Rebecca, staring ahead.

"Well he's nice from what I can tell. I've never been out with him before but he's been in my company a few times--double dates or just a gang of the girls meeting him and some guys."

"I don't want any more of that." Rebecca was shaking her head, thin red hairs vibrant in harsh florescent light. "I'm running out of time."

"To get married?"

"To get anything. I can't do any more of those Gulags."

"That desperate?" laughed Gerry. They had been looking out the window at gray rain, black trees being shaken for the last of their leaves, but turned to each other now.

"I guess I've read all the wrong magazines and books--self-help, new-wave, you name it." Rebecca affected a visionary face. "Hey! If I heard smear my tits with margarine and watch the men pant around, I'd do it. Well I wouldn't now. I don't do anything anymore. I don't have to. I help people who piss their pants, those far, far less-than- zeros to the Trevors of the world. And you know? It's the best thing I've ever done: I can be myself and nobody cares what I wear." Rebecca smoothed down her miniskirt.

"You always look nice, so petite." Gerry said. "Whereas I sort of lumber."

"Uh uh. It's okay for you to be yourself in any situation because you're tall and pretty. Well...beautiful it pains me to say. Whereas! Well let's face it, I'm a halfpint and...well what my mother's girlfriends call plain. Oh I do have this natural mole and

thoughtful dimples which drill in when I'm quizzical and can't decide anything." She pushed a short finger into her cheek. "Then all of life goes by, smiling through its asshole and carrying a whole bushel of self-help books." Gerry laughed lightly as Rebecca went on to demonstrate the dimples. "I fake them really, only piquant factor I got going, by sort of s-sucking in my cheeks like this, see? Chipmunk style. I can become dangerously cute! Any men around? Hate to waste this."

"Shouldn't I gather some?" Gerry flicked her chestnut hair in the direction of the inner offices.

"With you here it's a wonder they're all not sucking around already," Rebecca said, bending her bare knees inward as if to make herself smaller.

"They...won't get too religious on us and the unfortunates at this soup kitchen, or whatever it's called, will they?" Gerry inquired, sliding forward to the edge of the desk.

"Don't worry. Hell I was born Catholic but don't believe a thing they say. Anyway, you'll like Sister Lucy. She's the one I promised her I'd bring along another warm body tonight--if you can understand the alleged English of that. And believe it or not she likes a raunchy story if you can get her to sit still and listen. Actually she reminds me of my father in that way. He was a church

organist who carried a portable one around with him--a lay church organist. After he finally left, Mom took to watching this show *The Christophers*, where they said it's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness, you know? So that's what I do--the darkness is the area without a boyfriend."

"Well I'm in darkness and a Presbyterian to boot." Gerry drained her tea with exaggeration.

"It's okay, the bums won't care. Mother became a Baptist. They deal with drunks better--she's also a drunk. The Baptists got her in a home with bible-beating souses destroying each others' ears. Thus have they made of their hell a paradise!"

Gerry, still perched on the edge of the desk, pondered that comment with a wry smile and crossed her long legs, a balancing trick considering her position. Next to her, Rebecca also crossed hers a short beat afterwards--as if they formed a kind of show business act.

When Gerry got to the shelter's dining room that early evening, a regal if frail black man appeared in his underwear, and as quickly exited when Rebecca came out from the kitchen in the middle of a cloud of steam, her red hair frazzled. "Hi! That was Mr Chostermill-- Loony Tunes and Merrie Melodies." She whirled a small hand around her head.

Gerry waved her own trembling arm to indicate the scruffy

room full of long tables covered in oil cloth. "Not, uh, quite the office."

"Hey Mr Chostermill is at least interesting, whereas all the people around us in that office are vapid bores. Even in my old place, deadly though it was, I at least had a hot affair," Rebecca whispered, placing a hand on Gerry's shoulder and staring up into her eyes with mock gravity.

"You never told me." Gerry, too, was whispering, but then Rebecca spoke out in a quite audible voice as individual men sidled in and sat at the tables.

"Yeah it was with Paper Cups, that's what I called him. Life and death struggles about paper cups! He was the honcho for that stupid part of the entire stupid operation. Married man would you believe?" Rebecca attempted to arrange her steamed hair with her hands. "Perhaps I'm expiating that part of it with this charity--so-called." Her qualifier cued a bag lady to stagger in from the street and plop herself and accessories down in the middle of the floor. "Anyway, he had to choose finally between the wife and me and paper cups. You know what he decided, and we both threw him out therefore. And then the company threw him out too. Even paper cups betrayed him. We meet for lunch sometimes, wife and me--always in a

fancy restaurant where we go dutch, appropriately enough, and don't run the risk of any paper cups."

The bag lady snored. "That...was miraculously fast," remarked Gerry, her profusion of hair and slimness noted even by the half-aware bums waiting at their tables.

"Just Madame. Madame Marta!" Rebecca yelled abruptly.

Madame's eyelids shot up in a nest of several coat sweaters. "Germans took it, Russians took it," she sobbed.

Mr Chostermill re-entered, still in his underwear. "Her home," he explained. "That Europe is the god-awfulest place," he confided to Gerry. "Even worse than this."

Sister Lucy materialized from the kitchen, tiny and darkeyed, wearing a sort of army shirt over her habit, wiping her reddened hands on an apron. "I don't think we need your help on this one, Mr Chostermill," she informed him, but he didn't hear her, or anything, for he had lapsed into a wall-eyed gaze.

Introductions were made and Sister Lucy asked Rebecca to deal with Madame Marta, and Gerry to help Mr Chostermill find some clothes. "He...looks dead." Gerry gasped. It was as if a fine gray net
had descended on ebony Mr Chostermill.

"Just a few million more brain cells checking out," Rebecca was

chuckling. "He'll snap to."

He did, and they're soon at his locker in a dank dormitory room. The inside of the door holds a pinup of Betty Grable in bathing suit and heels, standing by a silvery airplane inclined towards deepest blue sky. Her head is twisted round to glance over a pink and creamy shoulder, under which her rear resembles a plump inverted heart of salmon red. Gerry spies one pair of trousers and one shirt hanging in the locker, both crisp and clean in steel-gray light. "Let's see-eeeeee now," Mr Chostermill ponders what to wear.

Choice generally presents itself along a wider front to Trevor Tressor. He has of course many more than one pair of trousers and one shirt, but just one creamy Alfa Romeo, and, alas, one computer sans flat screen. At the restaurant he dwells on this particular lack until Gerry worms in her experience with Mr Chostermill, growing uncharacteristically excited when speaking, too, of Rebecca and Sister Lucy and Madame Marta and the crushed men who had come in to eat.

"I don't know what I was thinking of when I bought it!" Trevor must explain when she stops to breathe. “The monitor dis-proportions the apartment!” He is tall, nearly cadaverous, and the immense sockets holding his dishwater eyes seem to darken in defeat.

"What's the problem? You want flat, you get flat!" she very nearly shouts at him. He peers at her with melancholy, stung by her insensitivity to his misstep in consumption. It seems at this point that all eyes in the Turkish restaurant rest on them, but as she lifts a sesame cracker dipped in humus to her mouth, she quickly fears that everyone in the crowded room is attentive only because her hands smell vaguely of urine, and she visualizes her last task at the shelter, sorting laundry with Sister Lucy.

She had rushed to wash them in her own bathroom, before the punctual Trevor came, but a perfumed liquid soap called SO-OHHH SUBTLE! proved not up to life that particular day.

The restaurant is a converted gas station and the metal locker in the Ladies' Room fortunately proves to be not merely a prop, still containing the gritty powdered soap of the mechanic. She likes the pain of washing with it while making faces in mirror imitating her mother, Jeanette, the aerobic whiner, and Trevor.

"Mother of all terror! And the PRINcess of Sweat!" she announces finally, "and this this this...Hamlet of the Consumer Culture!"

While putting back the box of soap and slamming the metal door she sighs, "Oh Gee Mr Chostermill I want your choices! Marry me, sexy Chostermill! I'll get my own shirt and pants and throw

everything else away! All the shit I've surrounded myself with, so I can keep working to buy more of it. SO-OHHH SUBTLE my ass! Made, created, especially for advertising. No wonder it's lousy--like everything else. Insane!" But she's feeling guilty about making fun of Trevor, since he seems decent enough. "Trev," she whispers, turning away from the locker, "there's got to be more to you, but for some reason I'm just not seeing it, because that sexy, wily old Chostermill is seizing my attention with his dying brain! Old, dark hypnotist!"

Gerry returns to sit opposite an enormously fat, caramel-colored man studying the tall menu. She babbles, "I know it's the last thing you want to hear, Trev, but I've got to talk more about what I did today. It was just a couple of hours or so but..." She looks up a few minutes later, breathless, expecting to see Trevor's bored, heavy- lidded eyes. Instead the moon-faced man with gold-rimmed glasses
explains, "You must forgive me for letting you go on. I lost my wife recently and you're so like her in your fresh loveliness and vitality and enthusiasm--I feel uplifted, honest to God! I came here just wanting to stuff my face and get a little drunk." She mutters something she instantly forgets, and there's Trevor to escort her back to their table, a patient who had wandered away from

the ward.

He, of course, knows what she needs, and it isn't helping Negroes in slums or restaurants; she, of course, wants to get out of there immediately, so he stuffs a breadstick in his mouth.

Something quickens in her during the ride to her apartment, the only sound coming from the wet tires, and her lungs all but burst while racing from his car after she had bit off "Thank you and I'm really sorry for the--" Her hair flies back red and black in the faint, dappled light from a streetlamp in the midst of skeletal trees.

Sister Lucy answers on the first ring and Gerry unleashes a ten-minute flurry ending with "Do you have to be a Catholic? I must be going crazy! But what I do in that office is so awful and so useless. Oh I am such a little asskisser! Where is my life? I mean I think it's somewhere but I can't find it! Oh I know this all sounds addled and schoolgirlish to you! But I just had to, was compelled to--"

She goes on a few moments before Sister Lucy yells "Whoa there! I'm sure as hell not Mother Teresa and neither are you. Well I shouldn't say that about you. We don't know about you yet."

Gerry begins sobbing and then gasps, "Well I better hang up...I'm sor--"

"Hold on, Woman! I didn't say we couldn't talk about other things. There are a lot of them, no? Life isn't just the shelter thank the Lord! Say anything. You just want to talk is all. Don't worry, I've felt that way. We all have."

Hours later she removes the soaking receiver from her ear, hardly remembering anything she said, only that she had to promise Sister Lucy not to come to the shelter until a week elapses. "Wired as you are tonight" sighed Sister, "you'd exhaust us all. But most of all, Gerry, I sense what we call a honeymoon. That's when people get
all benign and moony and want to save humankind right after their own canonization is instantly declared. Whereas I worry not about my future sainthood or bringing humanity up to snuff in the next ten minutes, but where my next meal is coming from--or my next thousand meals. I'm talking about the grit of business and the grease of politics. And...well, much begging in addition—actually, what seems the basest part to most people is really the easiest."

"I wouldn't mind begging!" Gerry had pleaded. "I'd much prefer it to shoving away the hands of every sleazebag manager I've every worked with."

"When I say anything at all I always say too much," she whispers

into a dawn filtering through the many front window panes, as pinkgray as the inside of a seashell. Her eyes burning and her hair matted next to her soaking ear, she becomes aghast at how long she had talked to Sister Lucy.

"Shit no I'm not going to bed!" she exclaims as if a judicious person had suggested it. "Wasting my life that way too! Usually to sleep away depression. At least tonight'll be different. She ends up going through CDs, sorts them into piles after flicking off the lights because of the glare off the plastic boxes. Her inner voice comments on the musical groups: *They fell to drugs...they fell from fame and strangled in middleclass life.*

"But it's normal life," she sobs. "What's wrong with it? It's what everybody gets! They're not ravening around their apartment in the middle of the night like a mad woman!"

And they fell from fame and became assholes! It comes to us all! "Yeah? Well not me. I'm getting out of this Gulag somehow!"

She ultimately falls asleep atop the CDs, wakes up trembling and frightened, and then puts on a heavy, musty sweater. "Am I of any any use?" she asks, staring up at a airplane, its red and blue running lights sliding along the pinkish sky.

"Hey, Betty Grable! I've got a nice ass too,□ she giggles, shaped just right, if short on substance. I try to keep it to myself, although I'd like to use it in my arsenal of lovin' tools, Betty Grable, but oh the cost is so so high, to say nothing of all the bullshit you have to listen to. Did I tell Sister too much, Betty? I'm feeling too ashamed to see her again. And honeymoon is such a curious word, Betty, don't you agree? What kind of honeymoon could you have with bag ladies and frail, frail tramps?"

The plane gone, a few stars still shimmer through the dawn sky. She goes into the bathroom to note in the lighted mirror her caved-in eyes and wild hair: *You! So that's what a saint looks like? Shit you're no saint! That's for sure!*

"I don't care what I am I'm going to be better!" she yells.

Read that in a selfhelp book did you? Any more little mottos?

"There could be."

Gerry, you're just a phoney, going here or there whenever anyone asks or yells. You never had a fuckin thought before! What'd you use

your head for?

She is hitting it, and the next moment slumping onto a sofa "Go away all you thoughts now! I'm no saint and I don't have the verve to be a sinner either. Is it written, verily, that there there

must be a Mr Paper Cups in my future?" she sighs. And she glimpses one, pudgy and benign, leaning back towards a backyard where kids play in and out of barbecue smoke, and wife stretches out in a chaise lounge, smoking, picking a shred of tobacco from her upper lip.

She shakes loose that domestic image only to see the women who run around her neighborhood Acme Market around dinnertime for something, anything, to microwave for the family: their tailored looks and drawn faces. And claws of hands.

"Sister said that happiness is a byproduct. Where's their happiness? The byproducts are in the meat they buy in those flat, frozen packages."

She rises from the sofa. "Compulsion be dammed, hey Mr Chostermill and Madame Marta and Sister Lucy and Rebecca! We'll hold hands and dance in our own crazy circle, the rising smell of piss keeping all the respectable people away, all the walking-dead women in their drycleaned suits, all the Mr Paper Cups wanting to use me to scum up their pallid lives." Gerry dances in the dim apartment.

Later, she wonders if Sister Lucy will eventually let her stay, and how long--and how far to take the religion of the thing.

"I'm really not anything along that line..." she had told Sister Lucy. "I was brought up Presbyterian, sort of. I...just don't know..."

"You don't know much of anything do you?" Her own voice startles her, standing close to a window and watching her haggard face in one rosy pane.

Gerry goes to a closet to get the jacket she uses on solo hikes, crushes it to her face to smell the woodsmoke and dry leaves.

"J. C., he said something like you have no mother or father, something, or let the dead bury the dead? Well I have no mother, or boss, or aerobics witch, or state-of-the-art gentleman caller."

She looks out on the empty street, a sheet of newspaper dancing fitfully, and imagines the lonely men lining up for breakfast at the shelter, this same newspaper wrapping around a straggler's legs; Madame Marta, terrified out of cluttered sleep, keens to them of her lost European home.

Gerry steps back and her image is repeated in the numerous panes, crisscrossed by strings of ice. It flickers as a draft travels through the apartment. She puts on the jacket and massages her taut neck. Then, for some reason, laughs uproariously, eyes marvelously cool. "You are little, Sister Lucy. You can't hold me

out! And don't you die, Mr Chostermill, at least not in the next hour or so!"

She buttons up the jacket, rips a tousled ski cap from a breast pocket.